

Relic

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Relic

****Ninth Age of Reclamation**

>Covenant Space Sector 1427 Patrol Route
Covenant Carrier _Fury of the Gods_**

Ship Master Lajko 'Ruusanee was bored out of his mind and angry beyond reasoning. As was every member of his crew. The battle at the planet the filthy humans had called Harvest had ended a full week ago. Yet apparently Supreme Commander 'Fulsamee still felt it necessary for a carrier, no less, to patrol six sectors away. He knew why he was doing this. 'Fulsamee was still angry that the _Fury_ had come out of slipspace so near to the system. The infidels had been alerted and fled underground like cowards before the planet could be glassed.

A landing had been made. The time-consuming atmosphere entry process. The problems with the gravity-lift. The low-ranking species creeping about in caverns underneath the human installations. The exploration of the cavern system, taking a full day. Almost a hundred Unggoy and Kig-Yar lost to tricky ambushes. Another hundred out of commission for a week at least. The humans getting off a distress call before the planet was glassed. The subsequent battle with the paltry human ships that nevertheless resulted in nineteen deaths on his side. The escape of one ship to tell the tale. All his fault.

When Commander 'Fulsamee had arrived to relieve him, he had not been pleased. 'Ruusanee could still remember the biting words and cold diatribes his childhood friend had thrown at him. Every charge deserved. He had failed. He had been expecting a demotion. 'Fulsamee, however, had admitted that 'Ruusanee had been victorious. He had instead put 'Ruusanee on the most mind-numbing, useless patrol route that could possibly be imagined.

It had been that way when they were children. 'Fulsamee led, 'Ruusanee and a host of others followed, lured by 'Fulsamee's charismatic personality and cunning mind. When they'd grown up, most of 'Fulsamee's followers had never learned how to think for themselves. They had sunk. 'Ruusanee had swum. He had slowly made his way up the ranks of the Fleet of Particular Justice.

When he had been made Ship Master, he'd turned his back on his impoverished and low-caste family. He regretted the betrayal now, but his parents had refused to speak to him since that time, eleven years ago. He was fifty now, his scales losing some of their youthful luster, but still a very competent and confident fighter and strategist.

Then the Fury of the Gods had been told to glass the human world. 'Ruusanee had failed; the heathens detected his ship and hid. They had brought the ship down through the atmosphere, a slow process at best. Then there had been a massive flaw in the gravity lift. They had taken ages to fix it. Then they'd begun a wild goose chase throughout the cavern systems of the world.

Eventually 'Ruusanee himself had landed to coordinate everything. He'd made three, maybe four kills. Three humans had fired lead pellets at him. His shields had not dropped by the time all three were dead. A fourth had come to investigate. A projectile had struck 'Ruusanee's head. The shield had held, but the impact had given him a nasty bruise. 'Ruusanee had lifted the heretic and flung him bodily away.

The humans had been worthless. The world had been worthless. He had found something there, however, which was sure to win 'Fulsamee's favor again. He was still drawn hourly to marvel at it.

He'd returned to the ship as soon as most of the human scum were dead and glassed the world from orbit. A day later, three human ships had arrived. Their warships were weaker than their soldiers. One ship had limped away, but not before 'Ruusanee had said, in a most dramatic voice, informed them that "their destruction was the will of the gods." The next day, 'Fulsamee had arrived, given him a tongue-lashing of particular viciousness, ordered him to patrol Sector 1427, and departed rapidly.

So here he was, obeying orders like a dutiful mindless slave. He gave a silent groan at the thought that he would be patrolling the region with nothing to do for two more weeks.

His boredom was interrupted as the ship's AI, classified Alpha Gamma-3764, spoke in a dull, flat voice to him. "Communication detected, Excellency."

'Ruusanee had given a start of hope. At the best, it might be his relief from patrol. But it wasn't. A human's voice spoke over the comm. unit. He moaned as the shrill, jabbering human speech for a second before telling the AI he called Algam to translate. What had come out was now recorded in the ship's databanks.

"This is Sergeant Major Andrew L. Gaetjens, to any UNSC personnel, please come in! Harvest is utterly destroyed. Everyone's dead except for me and Flight Officer Lawrence. We thought it might be rebels at

first...then they came down and killed us all...they're monsters, aliens, _things_! They killed everyone they could, then left. They bombarded us from orbit...turned the whole planet into glass so you could see yourself in the ground. This is Sergeant Gaetjens, Pelican Lima-three-thirty-seven, over!"

'Ruusanee had set a new course while the message was still playing. If he didn't get rid of the humans, he'd have another lecture from the Commander. Gods knew he'd had enough of those already.

**April 23, 2517, 1649 Hours Military Time
>Desert of Gora, Harvest Colony
Pelican L337**

Sergeant Gaetjens was also bored, although he had no reason to be. However, even being stranded on a superheated planet in a crippled dropship with a pilot steadily going into shock got old after a while, he decided. Even the crazed giggling of Flight Officer Billy Lawrence had become monotonous. The only thing that was maintaining his sanity was that he had a soldier to yell at. Not that he was purposely cruel or vindictive; he was just a Sergeant. It was his job to yell at soldiers. It made him feel better, anyway.

At 0525 hours the previous day, he'd been woken to hear that a high alert was out. The colony was under attack, he'd heard over the loudspeaker. He remembered grabbing his M6D pistol and running outside. A large, faintly purple ship dominated the sky. There had been no ships in system, so there had been an order for everyone to hide underground. He had sat on an uncomfortable chair in a darkened subterranean office for six hours, alternately bored and terrified.

At 1133 hours, Private Unera, Private TerHaar and Corporal Hanks had passed by, assault rifles at the ready. He'd gotten up to join their patrol route. But the leg of his fatigues had snagged on the uncomfortable chair. As he stooped to undo them, the Marines passed him. He had just freed himself when he heard, from the next room, gunfire and screams in inhuman voices. They were hissing, almost snakelike. Then a comically squeaky voice gave a gurgle of some kind. The pounding of the rifles intensified as Gaetjens stood there, uncertain of what to do. Then the gunfire had abruptly stopped. TerHaar had squeaked in a frightened tone "We gotta get out of here!"

Hanks had started to tell him to stow it, but his sentence had gone unfinished. There had been a clicking as of boot heels and an unnaturally deep voice that had said, in a businesslike manner, something like "Wort, wort, wort."

The stunned silence that followed was broken by a crackle of energy and the Marines' screams. Gaetjens had decided what he would do. He rushed into the room, firing high-explosive bullets left and right and screaming incoherently. He had just glimpsed a gold-covered something that towered over him and three mutilated corpses before he felt a grip like steel lift him and fling him so hard that, upon his impact with the office's plywood wall, he mercifully and immediately fell unconscious.

He had awakened and instantly wished he hadn't. As he departed hastily and quietly, he formed an idea to grab a Pelican and get the hell out of Dodge. He'd entered the hangar bay, walked into the troop

bay of dropship L337, and got the shock of his life upon seeing a young soldier, white as a ghost and bleeding. Gaetjens's HUD recorded him as Flight Officer William Lawrence. He was a Pelican pilot, call sign Tizon.

It had taken him several minutes to get Lawrence to respond. When he had, it took several more minutes to convince him to fly the Pelican out of there. Eventually, however, L337 had soared from the hangar, going to God knew where.

It was not more than a few minutes later when the first massive purple ray plummeted from the ship overhead. Within seconds, some kind of orbital bombardment had started. Lawrence was cursing fluently as he tried to maneuver the dropship around the beam. "Some kind of--bombing," he hissed between profanities. "Not sure what it is--maybe lasers--_oh shit!_"

One of the beams blasted through the air right in front of them. Lawrence yawed wildly to avoid it and overcorrected. The Flight Officer sat paralyzed as a beam loomed up on them. Gaetjens lunged for the steering harness a second too late. They avoided being instantly vaporized, but from the sudden and intense heat, Gaetjens could tell that the back of the Pelican had hit the beam. He blacked out from the abrupt rush of hot air into the cockpit. For a few seconds he woke up, but dropped from his chair unconscious again as the Pelican cratered with an unexpectedly loud crunch.

He had woken the next day at 1631 hours. Lawrence was already awake, giggling insanely. Gaetjens shoved the troop bay door open to find that the troop bay was a mass of deformed and melted metal. Looking at the ground to check that it was clear of debris, he found that it was steaming gently. Also, he could see his face in it. He gave himself a hard pinch, which hurt, ruling out the possibility that this was a very bizarre acid trip.

He'd pulled his M6D pistol from its holster, sat at the emergency broadcast device, and recorded a help message which was punctuated by the random chuckles of Lawrence. Not that he expected anyone to help. Everyone was probably dead.

So here he was. Nothing happening and nothing about to happen. He would wait until he starved. The ship's supply of MREs had been incinerated by the laser. He had nothing to do. He checked his gun. He looked in the cockpit first-aid kit and found a bottle of medicinal whiskey. Old-fashioned, but it would make a Marine get up and about. He unscrewed the hot lid gingerly and rose to his lips to find that the whiskey had evaporated. He gave a groan of disgust and threw the bottle up and backwards. It vanished over the Pelican's nose and shattered. A squeaky voice from behind him gave an extremely angry squeal. Gaetjens leapt to his feet, landed on the hot ground with a curse and jumped out, pistol at the ready.

A creature about four and a half feet tall stood there. It had a crest on its back, a mask on its face, and a weapon in its hand. Gaetjens aimed for the thing's head, and found he wasn't holding a weapon. An eight-foot monster stood beside him, holding the pistol by the barrel. Gaetjens jumped at the creature, which swatted him over the head. He fell to the ground, too weak to rise or cry out. The tall alien gestured for the short one to search the Pelican. It returned a second later and spoke to the tall alien. The tall one shook its

squid-like head and disappeared into the wreckage. When it reappeared, it was roughly dragging Lawrence behind it. It lifted the Flight Officer effortlessly, shook him, and fired the pistol three times into the young man's head.

Gaetjens dimly remembered shouting something, being struck, and being dragged to a strange ship.

When he became fully aware of his surroundings again, he was lying on a hard floor with an oily feel to it, behind a shimmering blue field. The tall monster stood on the other side of the field, manipulating a sort of control panel. The field dissolved. The alien walked over to Gaetjens, stood him on his feet, and said, in broken English, "Follow. Come to command center. Do not run, heretic."

Gaetjens followed the thing through endless oily pink corridors. As they walked, the alien pointed to himself and said, "Gento 'Hukilee. You?"

For a second, he started to say Sergeant, but stopped; a rank would only confuse the alien. "Andy Gaetjens."

The alien looked perplexed, although Gaetjens wasn't sure of the facial expression, and said, "Status-no. Rank?"

He was surprised at how much the alien knew. "Sergeant. Sergeant Major," he said clearly. 'Hukilee shook his head.

Gaetjens tried to explain. "Not a commander. Still a soldier, but an important one."

The alien gave a look of dawning comprehension, then muttered to himself for a second and pronounced, "Major."

"No, not Major, a Major is a comm-" Gaetjens broke off. "Oh, I get it. Major is a different rank for aliens."

'Hukilee thought for a second, then again pointed to himself and said Major. Gaetjens looked at the alien. It had red armor on. The one that had picked him up and thrown him had had gold armor. "What does gold armor mean?"

'Hukilee considered this, then said haltingly, "Gold-gold. Eh, gold is Zealot. Very important commander," he added at Gaetjens's look of incomprehension.

It was a minute before Gaetjens spoke. "Who am I going to meet at the command center?"

'Hukilee spoke immediately. "Ship Master Lajko 'Ruusanee. A Zealot. Wait-why I tell a heretic this? Ship Master will kill me if he learns I talk to a heretic."

"I'm not a heretic!" blurted Gaetjens.

"You are not Covenant," the alien said simply, "so you are heretic."

Gaetjens couldn't think of anything to say. While he was still silent, they entered what appeared to be the command center. 'Hukilee

bowed and spoke quietly in a language that Gaetjens couldn't understand. It was low pitched, very fast, and broad in sound. He heard something like, "Ey vajh tguhorv eit kittiruj." What he gathered was that his presence was being announced, but he couldn't be certain. A gold-armored alien on a raised platform in the room's center turned, nodded and dismissed 'Hukilee with a wave of his hand. When the other alien was gone, the Ship Master spoke in fairly correct English.

"So, you are the filthy infidel. I recognize you from the planet battle. You were very easy to throw."

Gaetjens's face flushed. No squid-headed alien was going to give him that. He wanted to give a witty retort, but what he said was, "Piss off, calamari face."

The alien cocked his head uncertainly, then clacked his mandibles together. Apparently this was a shrug.

Gaetjens kept talking. 'Why does everyone keep calling me heretic and infidel? I didn't do anything! Anyone would think we blew up some sacred relic of yours, the way you talk."

The Ship Master gave an angry hissing noise. "You did not 'blow up' anything. You merely left a holy icon in an unsacred place, not even a shrine, defiled it with your filthy additions, and kept it on one of the cursed worlds! You shattered taboo a thousand times over!"

Gaetjens thought this was going a bit far. "What do you mean? We don't have any relics of our own, much less relics of yours!"

The alien's face was hard and angry as it pressed a button on a shimmering panel. "Explain this to me, then."

A section of wall slid open, revealing a squat, angular object, irregular in form and roughly the size of a refrigerator, which Gaetjens had seen practically every day since he'd arrived at Harvest Colony. His mouth fell open in surprise. He berated the alien furiously. "You fool! That isn't your relic. We made it only six hundred years ago! It's not holy! It's an outdated, worthless thing!"

He had thought the aliens looked alarming before. When they were enraged, they were downright terrifying. The creature turned pale and its mandibles spread grotesquely. "You? You useless heretics did not make it! The script of our Lords the Forerunners are on it, along with a map to their home world! The path to our salvation is nigh, despite your race's profaning this holy relic! And you think your species made it? 'Hukilee! Destroy this infidel!"

A door slid open. 'Hukilee stepped through. Gaetjens knew he should run, but he stood there, pallid under his coffee-colored skin. Their home world...did that mean that the 'Forerunners' were actually...

Gaetjens's train of thought crashed there, because the rails were blocked in the form of an energy sword that pierced his chest from behind and ended the human heresy in the presence of the holy relic.

Long into Harvest's night, 'Ruusanee stood there, admiring the sacred object. It was a very good thing that he had retrieved this before he glassed the world. Even in the midst of heresy it retained its mighty sanctity. He had something to impress 'Fulsamee now. That thought was still running through his mind as he slept.

He returned as soon as he woke, glad to gaze on it again. But the letters on the bulky artifact read the same as they always had, and indeed always would.

End
file.